

# Numbers in American Indian Mythology

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*The universal belief in the sacredness of numbers  
is an instinctive faith in an immortal truth.*

D. G. Brinton

Since time immemorial people have attributed sacred meanings to numbers. The most significant numbers for the indigenous population of North America are three, four, and seven, and they play an important role in the lives of American Indians: in their mythology, rituals and ceremonies, chants, literature, architecture, visual arts, households, etc. American Indian numerical symbolism has much in common with that of other traditional societies, but in some aspects it is unique. Mythology not only helps understand the meaning of certain numbers, but also regulates their use in daily and ceremonial life.

Numbers are not simply the expressions of quantity – they are archetypes and symbols. It is especially true about the first ten numbers, which “pertain to the spirit. The rest are the product of combinations of these basic numbers” (Керлот 574). As the environment has greatly influenced American Indians, certain numbers are closely connected with natural – and mainly astronomical – phenomena (Григоров 95). No wonder that the mythological picture of the world, i.e., the very world order, is described with the help of numbers: “The space in the myth is measured both horizontally and vertically, and usually it is expressed in the symbolism of numbers 3, 4 and 7. Generally speaking, all numbers from 1 to 12 are strongly loaded with symbolism; however, the abovementioned three numbers are especially distinguished in this sense. Through their symbolism, numbers not only unite time and space, but, due to their inherent abstractness, are even able to lead us beyond the limits of time and space” (Ващенко 232-33).

Let us consider the meanings attributed by various American Indian nations to the most common numbers in their myths. *One* does not hold any important meaning, so the first significant number for American Indians is *two*. It symbolizes the *opposition*, but at the same time *duality* and *unity* which maintain the balance and harmony: good and evil, day and night, *male and female*. Most clearly this opposition is represented by the characters of the Divine Twins which can be found practically in all North American myths (e.g., Good Mind and Evil Mind with the Iroquois). In many Native American Creation myths there is a couple of first humans who continued creation, such as the First

Man and the First Woman of the Navajo (O'Bryan) or two sisters of Zia Pueblo (Williamson 72). The "law of supplements" plays an important role in the Navajo religion, where the balance is maintained precisely due to oppositions. "One well-known aspect of the Navajo creed is its essential duality ... good *is* evil, and evil is good. The difference between them lies in the presence or absence of control which, in its turn, entirely depends on the knowledge, for control is a ritual established long ago, but which is taught and trained" (Gladis 5-6). Moreover, "in all of North America except the southwest the belief recurs in one form or another that man is equipped with two kinds of soul"—a bodily and a "free" one which supplement each other (Hulkrantz 131).

*Three* represents the *vertical picture of the world*. Man

lives in a space defined by the Heavens (the Upper World), the Earth (the Middle World) and the Underworld (the Lower World) ... These three substances are derived from human physiology and psychology, but in myths they form a stable image-symbolic picture of the world. The upper substance is defined by the movement of the sun and its highest visible point (zenith). The lower extreme point of the circular path of the sun is imaginary (unseen by us) and is called nadir ... The center of the whole system of the universe is in the middle, and in mythology this center is called the Navel of the Earth, or the place of Creation. This is also the place where the personal consciousness of each of us resides. An individual in his mind is always located in the center of the world, he himself is the center of life. (Ващенко 36)

The significance of three is well illustrated by the Hopi mythology whose annual ritual cycle consists of three winter, three summer, and three autumn ceremonies (Waters 137, 198, 231). The Hopi also have three sacred sites, one of which, located in the east and dedicated to the sun, has three round stones "symbolizing the three previous worlds to which life was imparted by the sun" (Waters 43). According to the Hopi, there are three phases of dawn: "the purplish dawn-dusk when the shape of man is first outlined"; "the yellow light of dawn which reveals man's breath"; and finally "the red sunrise glow in which man stands proudly revealed in the fullness of his creation. The dawn of each new day and the dawn of each annual cycle endlessly repeat these three phases of all Creation and the dawn of life, the beginning of man's evolutionary journey" (Waters 137).

The most important number is *four*, the symbol of the *horizontal picture of the world*, which is most clearly represented among North American Indians: "In its essence, this symbolism stays for a cycle associated with fertility. Therefore, the horizontal picture of the world (the earth giving birth to fruit and living beings) looks exactly like a crossroads of four corners of the world. We know that there are also four ages of man, four seasons ... In traditional cultures, a separate range of axiological guiding associations was connected with each of the four directions" (Ващенко 35). Those *four cardinal directions* were not only associated with the four winds blowing from them, but had each its special color and an animal or bird, and sometimes even had a gender (Mooney 431).

They also appear in earth symbols of many tribes: a quadrangular earth suspended on four points of the Dakota; the earth with four tips of the Lenape Algonquin; a square with four spikes of the Sioux (Bayep et al 84-86). That's why during prayers and important events the smoke from the sacred pipe was offered in those four directions (Spence 125-126).

Four also numbers the worlds – three previous ones and the present one, where we live (with the Hopi and Navajo), and the Zuni word for the earth “contains as a root the word for four”(Williamson 67). The Kalapuya mention four ages of creation as well (“Мифы” 405). The myths of many American Indian tribes directly or indirectly describe “an origin from four brothers, to have at some time been led by four leaders ... or in some manner to have connected the appearance and action of four important personages with its earliest traditional histories.” For example, the Algonquin, Dakota, Creeks and Saux trace their origin from four ancestors (Brinton 78-80, 86). For the Hopi (as well as the Ojibwa, Algonquin, and some other tribes) this number also symbolizes the “four nations, four races” which “exist in the world and keep it in balance” (Bayep, et al. 84-86). The Hopi have four main religious societies. According to the myth, directed by Masaw, they made four migrations in the present world until they settled in the place of their residence, which was symbolically recorded on four tablets. In rituals they continue to use four colors of corn ears: “the yellow corn to the west, the blue to the south, the red to the east, and the white to the north” (Waters 195, 31, 235).

Four plays an important role in traditional American Indian architecture. The first four out of the twelve poles used for the construction of the sacred tipi for the girls' puberty rite of the Mescalero Apache represent the universe and reflect the history of Creation (Williamson 304). Generally, number four or its multiples are used in most ceremonies, and one of the most vivid examples of that may be the Sun Dance (both in terms of its duration and the number of poles for the ceremonial tipi), because, despite some differences between tribes, “each Sun Dance complex confirms the use of multiples of four” (Crawford and Kelley).

Moreover, this number reflects the *temporal structure of the world* that can be found in many myths and rituals all over North America: the most important phrases of prayers, chants and incantations are repeated four times, and

crucial periods in the story last four days, four weeks, or four years. The Mescalero Apache say that man passes through four stages of life ... Hopis who are about to travel away from the village for a period of time spread four lines of cornmeal across their entranceway to seal the door. No one will enter while they are absent ... Throughout their lives, formulas such as these, related to the celestial sphere, guided the traditional behavior of Native American” (Williamson 299).

During the Creek festival which “wiped out the memory of all crimes but murder ... every dance, every invocation, every ceremony, was shaped and ruled by the application of the number four and its multiples in every imaginable relation” (Brinton 73-74). The Western

Apache medicine man pronounced his spell four times, and to reinforce its action he used one of the four methods, three of which required the repetition of certain actions four times (Стукалин 218). According to Waters, “During Wuwuchim and other ceremonies the priests make four circuits around the village to reclaim this earth ceremonial in accordance with the universal plan”(24), and one of their myths tells how Spider Woman gathered soil of four colors – yellow, red, white and black, mixed it with her saliva and, having sung the Creation Song, from those pieces of soil created people in the image of her nephew Creator Sotuknang, and then – four more women in her own image, mates for the first four men (Waters 5). In the Seneca myth about a boy who overcame the magic by laughter, “the cycle of *four attempts* emphasizes the importance of the number four in Seneca folk-thought”; the main character “kills four animals in his attempts to learn to become a hunter, he overcomes four beasts at the spring, he finds four paths, each in one of the prime cardinal directions, he overcomes four magical guards of the trail” (Parker 170). Chiricahua Apache ceremonies are also full of appeals to four: pollen “is applied to the cheeks and head of the child four times and scattered clockwise to the cardinal directions” during the spring hair-cutting ceremony; the puberty ceremony lasts four nights, and its every cycle consists of four songs; masked dancers go round the fire four times, each time worshipping it, during Masked Dancers ceremony (Opler 18, 116, 127, 130, 274).

Four regulates the length of *lent* and *mourning*. During the Hopi migrations the person carrying a water jar for the whole clan (given by Masaw to provide them with water) had to pray and go without salt for four days before the new journey, and “for four more days he will pray and fast and go without sleep before planting the jar again.” In the case of loss of the jar the members of the tribe had to have the purification rite for four days before making a new one (Waters 34). The Inuit, Creeks, Dakota, and Algonquin left the food for the dead on their graves for four days, as “all these nations and many others supposed that the journey to the land of souls was accomplished in that time,” and “mourning for the dead was for four months or four years” (Brinton 75). If in the previous year someone died in the tribe, the Inuit winter solstice ceremony lasted *eight* days (twice by four) instead of the normal five (see below) (Gill and Sullivan 207). According to the Yuchi and Sioux, a person has four souls (unlike the more common system comprising two souls – see above) (Hulkrantz 131).

Many Hopi ceremonies – Wuwuchim, Lakon, Maraw, the Flute ceremony, the Snake and Antelope ceremonies – last *sixteen* days (four times by four), and this period is divided into the first eight preparatory days and the following eight days of immediately rituals (Waters 137, 231, 234, 212, 218, 173). However, the biggest multiple of four, which has ritual significance, is *forty*. “This was taken as a limit to the sacred dances of some Indian tribes, and by others as the highest number of chants to be employed in exorcising diseases”; it was also the maximum number of days for ritual purification, and women “of the upper Mississippi were held unclean the same length of time after childbirth” (Brinton 97).

*Five* is less frequent in myths, but it can also carry an important meaning. For the Kalapuya, five is the number used in sacred formulas (“Мифы” 405), and for many

Pueblos, as well as in a version of the Hopi myth, the number of the worlds is five: “four underground ones, and the fifth world, the world of the present” (Williamson 65). According to the Navajo and Hopi most traditional mythology, the world after the current one will be the fifth. Five also makes the *spatial picture of the world*, i.e. the four cardinal directions and their intersection – the above-mentioned Navel of the Earth – and that’s why the ceremonies of several American Indian tribes last five days (the winter solstice ceremony of the Inuit, the Bear Dance of the Jicarilla Apache), while the Bella Coola perform five dances during the Masked Dancers ceremony (Gill and Sullivan 207, 13, 164). The Hopi believe that “the living body of man and the living body of the earth were constructed in the same way,” and along the axis of those bodies (man’s axis being the backbone) there are five important vibratory centers (Waters 9-10).

*Six* is also connected with *space* and unites the *four cardinal directions, zenith and nadir*. Six directions are most frequently mentioned in the mythology of the Zuni, Hopi, and a number of Pueblos. That’s why the Zuni erect six houses for their Shalako ceremony, six figures participate in this ceremony “known as the Council of the Gods,” six dances are performed, and six sacred sites are located in the village (Gill and Sullivan 267).

*Seven* represents the *world order* to the fullest:

Mythology provides us with an integrated spatial picture of the world uniting numbers 3 (the vertical, 3 worlds) and 4 (the horizontal, 4 cardinal directions), which together form the symbolism of the number 7, especially deeply rooted in culture ... The human body synthesizes the vertical and horizontal structures of the world, also modeling the sacredness of the number seven. Like the Tree, man is a living organism, he exists both in time and space, and both cycles – temporal and spatial – reflect the way of every being from non-existence into existence and back. (Ващенко 37)

For the Cherokee, seven is “the actual number of the tribal clans, the formulistic number of upper worlds or heavens, and the ceremonial number of paragraphs or repetitions in the principal formulas” (Mooney 431). The Cherokee held a seven-day green corn ceremony, “whose center was a seven-sided ceremonial” during which “they sacrificed seven ears of corn” (Williamson 299). Seven is the number of stars in the Pleiades, known as the Seven Sisters, each of which represents for the Hopi one of the universes designated for the people and defines the length of the seven songs of Creation, and all together “the way of man on his Road of Life through seven consecutive worlds” (Waters 144, 158, 149).

*Eight* appears only as a multiple of four, “doubling” its action, while the last important number for American Indians is *nine*, which can be regarded as *a multiple of three* (the world vertical). Ceremonies of various tribes last nine days: Holyway and Blessingway of the Navajo, Wuwuchim, Marau and the Snake Dance of the Hopi, the mid-winter festival of the Iroquois, and “nine ‘works’ make the annual cycle of ritual, social and political life of the Tewa” (Gill and Sullivan 301). The ritual cycle of the Hopi

also consists of nine major ceremonies “corresponding to the nine universes of Creation” and “representing the universal laws of life” (Waters 238, 125). The Hopi believe “the nine most important prophecies, connected with the creation of the nine worlds: the three previous worlds on which we have lived, the present Fourth World, the future three worlds we have yet to experience, and the worlds of Taiowa, the Creator, and his nephew, Sotuknang” (Waters 334).

American Indian mythology often refers to numbers that do not only represent the system of world order and spatial-temporal relations (two – the creation itself; three and nine – the temporal structure; four, five and six – the spatial one; seven – both structures), but also remain important symbols and life reference points for people.

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